

A Honduran Mystery Animal

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A few years ago, Matthew and I attended the Creation Research Society's annual conference, and ended up hearing a third-hand story about a couple of strange quadrupedal (almost glyptodont-like) creatures that a missionary had seen in Central America. The story was vague, but intrigued me because I publish Bill Gibbons' *Missionaries & Monsters*, which details a number of mystery animals reported by missionaries and clergy as they traveled to remote areas of the world. Unfortunately, while the storyteller was enthusiastic about the report, she was cagey with pertinent details. (This is not particularly uncommon. Witnesses and others who have information about strange creatures sometimes feel they have to "protect" the animals by not sharing localities and other data.) It took several years, but eventually Matthew was able to elicit the witness' contact information. The witness (LS) is currently serving on a missions team on the other side of the world, but was happy to provide details of her unique sighting.

The Sighting

The location of the sighting was in grassland along a river in the mountains (approx. 5,000' elevation) Cortés Department, Honduras. The sighting occurred approx. 2001, at the end of the rainy season (possibly September), as the grass was very tall. Time of day was between late morning and noon. The approx. 80-acre property near the village of San Isidro is owned by a missions organization and used as a training school. River access is the easiest way on and off the property, but there is a dirt road to the nearest large town, Santa Cruz de Yojoa. The property is split by the river, with about forty acres of cleared grassland on one side, and jungle on the other. The area has villages clustered about four miles apart, with "lots of pineapple plantations, cattle ranches, coffee trees."

LS was on a tractor with a mower cutting the three-foot-tall grass. She first encountered a single animal, watching it for about 15 minutes as she mowed. She left, then returned to find two of the animals together. They showed no interest in her, or the mowing, for about ten minutes, until she got within six feet of them with the tractor's front end bucket, to force them to move to another area. Even then, it was "slowly, jerky movements," with no rush. ("They seemed docile when I was around, only when I pushed them to move with the tractor did they turn slowly, never showed signs of fear or alert, just moved on.")

The animals were quadrupedal, about as tall as a "12-hand Shetland pony" (or 48 inches tall at the withers). (The height may have been a little shorter than this, based on further conversation, so somewhere between three and four feet is a reasonable approximation.) The torso was barrel-shaped, though "deep on the sides, but narrow from the front view," so not paunchy. The body length from just behind the head to the start of the tail was about 3 feet in the larger animal, and 2 ½ feet in the smaller one. LS believed the weight to be between 450-600 pounds, noting "I used to raise hogs, at sales yard got good at weights, only I don't know how solid these guys were."

The tail was "not an attachment, just a continuous flow of the body. Underneath it was a continuance of the underline. That was about 10 inches off the ground, then dragged on the ground for about three feet." It came to a point with no spines or ridges. It "jerked when the animal moved." The animals had stout legs ("I couldn't put my two hands around the circumference. 18-20 inches?") The legs appeared short compared to the entire body; joints weren't visible except for the hocks on the hind legs. "They could sit like a dog" and stand up easily from that position. The feet had toes, with long claws like an alligator. ("We have gators at our base in Florida, so I am familiar.")

The head was very flat, with little snout. (The mouth reminded her of Kermit the Frog.) She did not notice nostrils, and saw no teeth, or tongue. (Neither animal attempted to feed on grass in her presence.) The head was encircled by a frill that went all around from jaw to jaw, no tapering, but pointed (with points, not spikes, spaced evenly apart). The base of the frill was a thick three inches before rising up into the points. It didn't seem to be able to move position, remaining upright. She did not see any ears or ear holes. ("Actually wondered if they had much hearing, as my tractor with the rhino cutter going was very loud.") There were no horns or spikes

on the face. Eyes were set close to the corners of the broad mouth. There was no visible neck. (“When they turned, it was a forearm-leading turn, not a head turn.”) They made no sounds.

Overall coloration was gray like an elephant or rhino, with no markings. One of the animals, however, had the neck/chest area coloration “the beautiful color of a cock pheasant.” The other’s neck was “shiny like chrome,” but she felt that may have been because they had just come from crossing the river, which was a few feet away. Skin texture seemed heavy like that of a hippopotamus, but not armored like an armadillo.

The animals had apparently arrived from the river. (“These rivers are shallow and narrow except during rainy season. Even then not very wide.”) After pushing them on with the tractor, LS left. Returning later, the animals were gone, and she believes they had to have left via the river, or she would have seen them go.

Two others on the property eventually saw the animals (one man, six months later, saw the pair cross in front of him on the road to Santa Cruz de Yojoa, surrounded by pastureland). They all agreed on the similarities. Locals, however, appeared not to know what they were talking about when they described the animals. (LS noted she knows little Spanish and no tribal languages there.) No further sightings after that, however, are known. The Mission’s current base coordinator has been there for a number of years now, without any sightings.

The witness is certain that it wasn’t a misidentification of a known species like a tapir. She believes that she saw a type of dinosaur, similar to drawings and toys of ceratopsian dinosaurs. Other than her experience, she doesn’t appear to have any real interest in dinosaurs, and no anxiety over trying to prove that she saw what she believes she observed.

Accompanying Sketches

LS was unable to provide her own sketch of what she saw, so I commissioned a blind contest on Freelancer, providing details from LS’ report, and after choosing a couple of images that I felt captured the basics, went back and forth between LS and the two artists to try and capture the morphological details. It can be frustrating for witnesses to go over the same details again and again, but it is important to try and pin down specifics. Of course, it can also be tricky finding an artist who is able to visualize what a witness is saying and put it on paper without pushing an interpretation of their own. When a witness is unable to offer a sketch,



Sketch by Oleksandr Pitura



Artistic Modeling by Steven Bellshaw

however, you have to find a reasonable alternative. Both artists came up with roughly similar morphologies, though Steven Bellshaw's art does depict a larger "frill" that seems to more accurately portray the witness' description.

Conclusion

Ceratopsian-like mystery animals are infrequent in the cryptozoological literature (outside of certain Central African reports). We have not run across similar accounts from Central America. Given that we had to specifically seek out the eyewitness, and she had no motivation to exaggerate what she saw (and in fact took several conversations to elicit some of the unique aspects of the case), we believe this mystery animal to be worth further investigation.

On the whole, the animal shares many features similar to those of ceratopsian dinosaurs. Intriguingly, the presence of claw-like nails is a feature of certain basal ceratopsians like *Montanaceratops*. However, there are certain other characters which don't immediately correlate to known ceratopsian fossils. How much discrepancy might be due to witness error, or to lack of diversity in preserved fossils, is unknowable until better evidence is presented (if in fact it can be obtained).

There is one impediment to serious investigation of this mystery animal. Honduras is a hotbed of drug lords and gun-runners. The U.S. Department of State has a current travel warning for Honduras, due to critically high levels of crime and violence. It may be possible to direct local investigation, but at this point we're unaware of any cryptozoological investigators in Honduras.